

FOREWORD

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Oral History Interview

with

CHESTER BOWLES

February 2, 1965
New Delhi, India

By Robert R.R. Brooks

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BROOKS: This is a recording by Ambassador Chester Bowles. It is taking place on February 2, 1965, at 17 Ratendone Road, New Delhi, India. At this time, Mr. Bowles is Ambassador of the United States to India. The interlocutor during this recording will be Robert R. R. Brooks, Chief Cultural Affairs Officer of the U.S. Information Service in India, a long-time friend and associate of the Ambassador. Mr. Bowles, when did you first meet President Kennedy.

BOWLES: The first time I remember meeting him was at the Democratic Convention in Hartford in 1954. He appeared as the keynote speaker at the Democratic Convention that year. Although I probably met him before that, I do not recall it. I do remember very clearly his coming to the Convention with his beautiful wife, Jackie, and making a very great impression upon everyone. He was, of course, particularly noticed because he was a fast-rising political figure in the adjoining state of Massachusetts and well-known in Connecticut.

BROOKS: Did you know him when you were in Congress? Did you ever work together with him during that period?

BOWLES: Well, I think your impression to some degree is correct although all we have taken into account so far is the fact that during the 1950's a concept of foreign affairs had been built up by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party which included thoughtful attention to the developing areas. Part of this concern was misguided because there was a feeling that if you put money into the developing areas, everything would progress by itself. Nevertheless, a general foreign policy approach had been built up. It was fought out in the Democratic Policy Committee under Paul Butler. It was expressed in the Democratic platform, and it was expressed by people like Humphrey, Stevenson, myself, and others who made a great many speeches and wrote a great deal on the subject. It was also expressed by Kennedy himself. If much of this sounds like Kennedy reacting to situations, he was, in a sense, reacting to the policies and attitudes of mind to which he had himself contributed as a kind of a Democratic Party, or liberal Democratic Party, approach to foreign affairs.

Kennedy, however, went far beyond that. I think two or three of the most important things he did included his speech at the UN in September 1961, which was a great speech in which he reached out for peace in a very vigorous and bold way at a time when it would have been very easy to crawl into our nuclear shell, glare at everybody, and say that the Russians were making such initiatives unprofitable. Second, a year later, when he won the Cuban encounter with Khrushchev, he was very skillful and very careful in leaving the way open for future negotiations. He wanted to use this opportunity not only to teach the Russians a lesson but also to advance the cause of peace by proving to the world, to Khrushchev and to the American people, that you just could not continue down this path of confrontation and counterconfrontation without something very ugly happening sooner or later. Thirdly, he took the initiative in his speech at American University in 1963 by speaking out affirmatively once again for an end to the cold war, or at least at an easing of the difficulties that divided the world.

BROOKS: It might be helpful if we shifted now from more general topics to the question of your own personal relationship with President Kennedy. I wonder if

Kennedy went along with only part of the Rostow-Taylor proposals, i.e., sending 16,000 training officers to help modernize the South-Vietnamese army. I have been convinced that Kennedy would not have gone beyond those sixteen thousand. He might have gone a little beyond. I don't think this is just wishful thinking. I don't think he was ever very concerned with it. I think he was reacting to--as I said before, the Bay of Pigs episode--he was reacting to Khrushchev. He wanted to show him that he wasn't just a young, weak, wobbly person. He wanted to demonstrate to Khrushchev he could be tough too, and Vietnam was a good place to be tough in.

O'BRIEN: In your other interview you mentioned that you had had a conversation with (Anatoly F.) Dobrynin prior to the Cuban missile crisis. You said you had gotten some reports that missiles were being brought into Cuba. I assume at that point you didn't know whether they were interballistic missiles rather than defensive missiles.

BOWLES: No, we didn't. We knew they were bringing in planes as well as missiles--bombers. I used to see Dobrynin maybe every few months or so for lunch. It so happened that I had lunch with him this day. Tom Hughes, who was head of State's Intelligence, he'd formerly worked for me, came in and said, "We just got the most shocking news here that the Russians are really moving stuff into Cuba." And I couldn't believe it, and he said, "Well, no, but we know that it's true."

So when seeing Dobrynin, I said, "Don't play around." At that time a lot of people were talking about the President bluffing, saying he wouldn't really do anything about it. There had been a lot of rumors about this. I was going away to Africa in three days--two days, so I said, "If this is true, and I think it is true, it's absolute folly. And please assume it's folly, that you'll be in difficulty if you can't stop it. Our relations will be in grave trouble." I don't think he had any idea of it, from his own government. I reported this conversation to the President, also to Rusk. I believe a note on my conversation on all this, is in my files somewhere.

O'BRIEN: You mentioned prior to that that you had spent some time on the JO3 Committee. Did you get in at all on some of the developments that took place after the Bay of Pigs and between the missile crisis, in regard to some of the activities of--well, some of the clandestine activities that were directed at the . . .

BOWLES: No. This subject was handled at the President-Secretary level, with of course, Allen Dulles and to some degree McNamara. The JOG Committee's activities were more connected with Tibet and China. Most of our work was involved in that. I think most of your Cuban stuff, as I remember, was bypassed and went directly somehow. . . .

O'BRIEN: To the Mongoose--was it to the Mongoose Committee?

BOWLES: I think so, yes. That's what they called it. At that time, I was greatly concerned by the confused lines of authority in under-cover programs and also with the organization of the CIA. I was asked to put together a memorandum on the alternatives--after the Bay of Pigs on what can we do now, what are the choices? And I did that, knocking down the big ones. The general feeling there, in the President's office--if you had taken a vote at those first few meetings on what to do next after the Bay of Pigs, you would have had a three-to-one vote to invade Cuba. That's my judgment. But the President kept his head.

O'BRIEN: Does (Edward G.) Lansdale have any particular impact?

BOWLES: To some extent. I saw him only two or three times. I was quite impressed, but not tremendously so. I thought he was overrated probably. The idea of combining military and guerilla jungle tactics to deal with subversion was for a while very appealing, and Lansdale was sort of symbolic of that. The Green Berets sort of reflected that, cops and robbers, and cow-boys and Indians, ambushing people. Again the liberals were looking for a cheap way out.

In talking this way about the liberals, what I feel was missing was a really deep-seated liberal view about the world in that period, that was really down deep. I think we could have turned history around in that ten years, if Kennedy lived, if he'd seen it. And I think that he--his charm and his strength and the guts he showed at the missile crisis. . . . If you asked me what is the most important single need of the President, I'd say the guts to say no to the military and keep on saying no until they get tired. Kennedy had that, and I doubt Nixon has.

O'BRIEN: Well, Rostow was the chief spokesman for the idea that the Cuban missile crisis was a great turnaround in American foreign policy. Do you see that as a watershed in any way?

BOWLES: How does he mean it?

O'BRIEN: As I understand it, he sees it as the great divide in which communism was on the offensive before and democracy is on the offensive afterwards.

BOWLES: I don't see--where the hell are we on the offensive?
I don't see that we're on the offensive anywhere. We're just sort of drifting and have been since the Cuba crisis. I think it was a marvelous performance by Kennedy, and I think that it proved that he had guts, and I think that's the essential thing.

My friends all say, "Who's going to be the next President? Is it (Edmund S.) Muskie? Who are we for?" First of all, no person exists who is capable of being President. There's nobody qualified, nobody half-qualified. You have to assume we're going to have a half-qualified person in that job. If you assume that . . . start with that, then what are the qualifications we want? We want, first of all, a guy who will say no to the generals, the Chiefs of Staff, as Kennedy did. Secondly, you want a guy who can communicate with the American people and also with Congress, and can give them a feeling--be an educator, in a sense. He doesn't have to be a good administrator. He can hire administrators. But Kennedy had that first all-important requisite.

What scares me now is, I can see a miscalculation coming sometime, and I can't see Nixon having the guts to say no. I hope I'm wrong. I think Ike (Dwight Eisenhower) would have said no. I'm not sure (Harry S.) Truman would have. I'm trying to be honest, I admired Truman. But he went along with the boys. Acheson ran our foreign policy. Truman was a great man otherwise, but he rubber-stamped a lot of Acheson's policies which I think were wrong. I think Acheson was terrific inside of Europe. If you take his assumptions, that the whole future of the world has for the last hundred years been run out of Europe, it was a brilliant performance. But the assumptions were wrong. With the end of colonialism the world was no longer run by Europe and a European balance of power was only part of a policy.

O'BRIEN: What happens to policy planning?

BOWLES: Well, in the first place you have a lot of bright people, and you don't know what to do with them--you don't know how to assign them, so you put them in